

and the turn of the century.²¹ Author and former Wilmington resident Charles Waddell Chesnutt told a Boston newspaper in March 1901 that his sources in the city told him that since the “massacre,” as blacks called it (whites called it the “Revolution”), over 1,500 of the “best blacks” had left the city.²² The “best blacks” referred to by Chesnutt were most likely entrepreneurs who closed their businesses and moved because they saw better opportunities in other parts of the state or nation.

The 1900 census reflected the out-migration of the city. The city’s black population dropped by over 900 people in the ten years between 1890 and 1900, and, for the first time since the Civil War, whites outnumbered blacks in the city. While the black population decreased during these years, the white population increased. The out-migration from Wilmington and New Hanover preceded the nationwide Great Migration by almost a decade, but, as some historians have noted, racial violence such as that experienced in Wilmington may have been a contributing factor as important to

the impetus to leave as that of an economic downturn.²³

Comparative review of the 1880 and 1900 census for other states shows that the numbers of blacks born in North Carolina yet living in other states increased substantially in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Other states such as New York, Virginia, Delaware, and Maryland also saw an increase in the black populations from North Carolina. The state with the largest overall increase in the number of blacks born in North Carolina was Pennsylvania—the number of North Carolina blacks living that state jumped from 629 in 1880 to 4,862 in 1900. New York followed a similar pattern with 1,270 in 1880 to 5,866. The

²¹ For the problems that the out-migration caused James Sprunt, the city’s largest employer of African American labor at his compress, see Chapter 7.

²² *Boston Evening Transcript*, March 20, 1901. A study of the Great Migration by Carter G. Woodson has pointed out that the African Americans who packed and left the south beginning in 1916 were most often the better-educated and skilled workers. Chesnutt’s observation about Wilmington’s early out-migration forecasted the coming trend. Statistical study of migrant groups during the Great Migration supports Woodson’s theory—one out of every six literate blacks left the South between 1890 and 1920. Carter G. Woodson, *A Century of Negro Migration*, 147; Alferdteen Harrison, ed., *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 46; E. Marvin Goodwin, *Black Migration in American from 1915 to 1960: An Uneasy Exodus* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 10.

²³ During the Great Migration which began in 1916 and lasted until roughly 1930, thousands of African Americans left southern states for northern cities. Most historians and government studies pointed to economic factors as the main reason for the migration — wartime industry needed laborers. However, further study has shown that many of the migrants sought to find less hostile environments in which to live, work, and raise families. For a good overview of the Great Migration, see Alferdteen Harrison, ed., *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991). Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck, in an essay in Harrison’s *Black Exodus*, contended that blacks exposed to “high levels of lethal violence” chose to leave. Harrison, *Black Exodus*, 31. The U. S. Department of Labor published a study of the migration in which the Department determined that the migration was due to “general dissatisfaction with conditions, ravages of boll weevil, floods, change of crop system, low wages, poor houses on plantations, poor school facilities, unsatisfactory crop settlements, rough treatment, cruelty of the law officers, unfairness in courts, lynching, desire for travel, labor agents, the Negro press, letters from friends in the North and finally advice of white friends in the South where crops had failed.” U. S. Department of Labor, *Negro Migration in 1916-1917* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1919), 11-12. It is very plausible that all of these types of troubles cited as reasons for the Great Migration could be translated into the types of reasons that Wilmington’s residents decided to leave after the violence of 1898 and the imposition of segregation.